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ACCELERATE SALES:

## Flex for success

Make more sales by adjusting your questioning techniques to the needs and personality of each client.

MARTIN C. SHANKER



I often hear sales associates complain, “The client didn’t know what he wanted!” or “He couldn’t answer my questions.” Male clients, especially, are often in a hurry and unsure what they want. They may have limited knowledge of a merchandise category and may be afraid of making a poor choice. Sales associates facing such situations must adapt their questioning to the needs of the customer.

### Appraising the Situation

Here are some things to look for:

- Do you frequently hear complaints that customers don’t know what they want?
- Do your salespeople use a similar cadence and set of questions when selling to both men and women?
- Do many sales associates have better success selling to one gender or the other?
- Do you hear sales associates acknowledge unique needs of different clients and explain why they need to ask a question at the beginning of an interaction?

### Best Practices

Here are pointers for flexing and handling male clients:

**Acknowledge needs and reassure.** If a man appears rushed or uncertain, recognize this and explain why you need to ask some questions. For example: “You seem rushed today. I can help you find what you need quickly, but because of our wide assortment I need to ask one or two questions.” Or: “You look uncertain. I can help if I know more about your situation. May I ask a question or two?”

**Adjust tactics, not strategy.** Different client needs may force a change in questioning tactics, but your strategic goal should remain the same: Identify the key product characteristics that will meet the desires or dreams of the customer so you can subsequently prove that your recommendations meet his needs.

When a client knows what he wants, questioning can be direct. When confronting uncertainty, however, take a less direct approach to avoid making the client feel threatened or stupid.

The key is open-ended questions that yield useful information. Don’t start off by asking, “What size is she?” or “What is her favorite color?” Ask, “To use your time well, what were you thinking of purchasing for her?” If the client does not know, simply tell me a little bit about how your wife spends her time.” As the client answers, gently probe with additional open-ended questions: “How does she typically dress when she does that?”

**Check your conclusions.** The more correct your first recommendation, the more likely the sale. After listening to responses, you might say: “So, your wife is a successful professional who typically dresses in business attire. She loves blue, but avoids bright colors. Since she is petite, she likes her clothes fitted and she prefers suits. And since this is a gift for your fifth anniversary, you would like to purchase something special.”

**Provide Alternatives.** The more uncertain the client, the more important it is to provide alternatives and use the ensuing discussion to test your hypotheses and collect more information.

Bring out three alternatives and listen for the customer’s reaction. If he’s leaning toward one or two of the selections, probe with an open-ended question: “You seem to like this one in particular; tell me what you like about it.” Typically, you have only two chances to bring out merchandise before the customer becomes impatient. If you have to return for a second set of selections, learn as much additional information as you can first.

**Confront uncertainty by asking for the purchase and reinforcing the decision.** Reinforce what the client has said he likes about his selection, and repeat why it’s an excellent choice given all you know about the recipient.

It’s important to flex and adjust your questioning techniques to the needs and personality of each client. The more uncertain the client, the more creative you need to be in eliciting information in a manner that makes him so comfortable that he returns frequently.

#### **About Shanker Inc.**

*Martin Shanker is the founder and president of Shanker Inc., a Manhattan-based international management consulting firm for such companies as Burberry, Cartier, The Estee Lauder Companies, Ralph Lauren and Van Cleef & Arpels. Described as a 'behaviorist' by The New York Times, Martin specializes in helping global brands accelerate sales and profit by growing their companies from within. By addressing the tough issues of sales and management teams, and the behavioral dimension of retail relationships, Shanker Inc. offers a unique, multi-dimensional way for companies to achieve success through their own people.*

[martin.shanker@shankerinc.com](mailto:martin.shanker@shankerinc.com) • (866) SHANKER • [www.shankerinc.com](http://www.shankerinc.com)